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AUTHOR Corbett, H. Dickson
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ABSTRACT

The application of a social theory perspective to an analysis of the concept of restructuring is the purpose of this report. Restructuring is a conjunctive concept that involves changes in a school district's pattern of rules, roles, relationships, and results. A systemic viewpoint examines the reciprocal interactions between structure and process that influence program effectiveness. Examples are presented to illustrate how different goals require different patterns of rules, roles, and relationships. Successful restructuring necessitates the consideration of all systemic components for the implementation of cultural rather than organizational change. (5 references) (LMI)

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ON THE MEANING OF
RESTRUCTURING

A social system's structure is its pattern of rules, roles, and relationships. Restructuring, then, represents a change in these social characteristics. However, restructuring is not to be done simply for restructuring's sake; it's sole purpose is to produce substantially different results from those a district is currently producing. Thus, restructuring involves alterations in a school district's pattern of rules, roles, relationships, and results.

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H. Dickson Corbett

RBS
Research for Better Schools
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123

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H. Dickson Corbett

Research for Better Schools
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123

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Introduction

School district restructuring is receiving considerable attention in the popular educational press at the moment. Its visibility ostensibly derives from reformers' beliefs that signficant gains in certain educational results will be impossible without a signficant alteration in the way schooling is conducted. However, as is typical of numerous educational improvement ideas, definitions of restructuring vary considerably. The vagueness of the term will enable advocates of particular improvement approaches to simply relabel these initiatives, thereby insuring their programs' "relevance." As this happens, the label "restructuring" will become meaningless and easily relinquish its moment in the sun of educational reform.

The bias of this paper is that restructuring is too promising a means of dramatically improving schools to allow it to suffer the same fate as other educational fads. The paper's purpose is to examine the concept closely enough, using a social theory perspective, so as to distinguish restructuring from less substantive change efforts -- and, thus, to separate the reality of restructuring from the rhetoric.

A Definition of Restructuring

A social system's structure is its pattern of rules, roles, and relationships. [1]* Restructuring, then, represents a change in these social characteristics. However, restructuring is not to be done simply for restructuring's sake; its sole purpose is to produce substantially different results from those a district is currently producing. Thus, restructuring involves alterations in a school district's pattern of rules, roles, relationships, and results.

The word "district" is used above deliberately to signal that restructuring is a systemic activity. While individual school buildings may successfully alter their patterns of rules, roles, relationships, and results, substantial change will be rare and fail to outlast the tenure of key staff members unless formal and binding agreements with the central office and school board have been made. Thus, "district" is used throughout this paper, even though it is recognized that in some settings not every school building will be involved in restructuring.

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* Footnotes appear on page 15.

Rules

> Rules "represent common understandings about what is and what ought to be." [2]

"Common" means "shared," and, thus, restructuring is intimately tied to the extent to which staff members know about and adhere to the same expectations about the way a district should operate. Common understandings are contained not only in formal policy (e.g., overall goal statements, curriculum guidelines, procedures for allocating resources, reporting requirements, the distribution of rewards, and class schedules), but also in more informal understandings concerning "the way we do things around here." [3] For example, "administrators always touch base with teachers before making decisions that may affect the curriculum or instruction," or "the superintendent picks good people and then gives them the freedom to do their job," or "school ends at three o'clock but no one leaves then." Formal and informal rules legitimize behavior, and alterations in them signal that new behavior is to replace traditional behavior.

Put in other terms, rules are the basis of a school district's culture -- "the socially shared and transmitted knowledge of what is and what ought to be, symbolized in act and artifact." [4] Rules, then, are much more than the dry and rarely referred-to content of policy manuals, curriculum guides, and budgetary procedures; they denote the behaviors that are critical to a district's functioning and embody the values and beliefs that professional educators (and parents) hold about schooling. Indeed, rules are the behavioral implications of those values and beliefs.

The most important rules relative to the issue of restructuring are those embedded in the vision of what the district "ought to be." Vision supplies purpose and direction. Vision is the touchstone that enables staff members to determine which tasks are meaningful enough to expect adults and children to perform. It establishes rules that unquestionably apply to everyone in the system and are the basis for resolving uncertainties about the appropriateness of activities. A district may operate smoothly without vision, and may even improve; but the improvement will be episodic, directionless, and noncumulative. Restructuring is systemic, and systemic change requires a vision.

Rules are inseparably entwined with how roles, relationships, and results become defined in a school district. Roles are shared understandings (rules) about appropriate behavior, and its meaning, that adhere to particular positions; rules establish the predictability necessary for staff relationships to exist by determining who should interact with whom about certain issues, who has the authority to make decisions, and where resources will be allocated; and the results that receive the most attention are logically those that provide the most information about the quality of the work emanating from the enactment of rules through roles and relationships.

Roles

> A role is a regular way of acting, expected of all persons occupying a given position in the social order as they deal with specified categories of others. [5]

That is, specific sets of expectations adhere to particular positions. These expectations, both formal and informal, define (a) the responsibilities that the superintendent, central office staff members, building administrators, teachers, students, and parents (in their contact with the school) are to assume, and (b) the accepted ways for these people to carry out those responsibilities. Altering role definitions requires a system to attend to what these people should be doing that is different from what they are currently doing. For example, should students be viewed as passive recipients of knowledge or should they be regarded as active manipulators and creators of knowledge? Should teachers instruct students using only the best available practice or should they also observe and critique other teachers' use of best available practice? Should building administrators only arrange for release time for teachers to attend staff development activities or should they also attend themselves and be required to demonstrate the knowledge and skills contained therein?

The above three questions suggest that restructuring concerns the establishment of new expectations for district and school roles. Thus, restructuring is more than enabling administrators, teachers, students, and parents to do better at the jobs they currently have; it also is to create new jobs for them to do. Indeed, a district need not, and should not, engage in restructuring if, for example, it simply seeks to get teachers to use information about different learning styles in their individual classrooms. The expectation that teachers should incorporate effective ideas into their practice, while worthy, is a rule that in most districts is already embedded in the definition of what teachers should do; and it is not necessary to invoke the name of "restructuring" to promote this effort. Restructuring would entail the deletion of, the addition to, or -- at a minimum -- the dramatic shifting of emphasis among the expectations that currently define particular roles.

Restructuring also may entail the creation of new roles. For example, in the course of enabling teachers to have greater influence in deciding what a staff development program should be, a need may arise for a permanent position that different teacher leaders could rotate into and out of to improve the coordination of

particular projects. Similarly, it may be symbolically and substantively important to establish a new position located in the central office that is responsible for promoting and supporting a restructuring effort rather than simply to add restructuring responsibilities to an existing position's job description.

Relationships

> A social relationship can be said to exist only when, as a result of their common culture, one person's behavior elicits a dependable and expected response from another. [6]

Rules, either formal or informal, establish the range of responses a teacher, for example, is expected to make to a principal's requests to perform certain duties -- as well as the legitimacy of the requests in the first place. To the extent that similar responses tend to accompany particular requests, then it can be said that a relationship exists. It does not matter, for definitional purposes, whether the requests lead to the responses the principal hoped for or to unintended responses as long as there is a consistency and, thus, a predictability in the responses made. Restructuring seeks to disrupt existing relationships associated with unsatisfactory results and to replace them with new sets of relationships that presumably will be more effective in producing the different kinds of results sought and/or to create relationships where previously none existed.

This disruption and/or creation can be accomplished by focusing on rules that determine the likelihood that one person's behavior will affect, or influence, the behavior of others. These rules are related to who interacts with whom in the district about certain issues, the distribution of authority to make decisions, and the allocation of resources.

For example, assume a central office administrator in charge of curriculum and instruction traditionally has been the person who decides about the content of the district's inservice workshops and selects the people who will conduct them. Also assume that this person has become troubled by the relatively low "yield" of these workshops in terms of encouraging teachers to incorporate suggested ideas into their regular classroom practice. To promote more "ownership" of these ideas the administrator creates a teacher committee to provide input concerning these workshops. This step alone may alter existing relationships somewhat by providing teachers an opportunity to state their preferences and persuade the administrator to heed their advice. However, the probability that these preferences would actually influence the administrator's behavior would be improved by locating the final authority to decide about workshop content and process with the committee and allocating the committee a budget with which to work. Without these additional measures, the considerable weight of traditional relationships

would likely overwhelm any dramatically new patterns of influence resulting from the changed patterns of interaction, thereby negating the amount of teacher time invested in the committee's work. The consequence of negating teachers' time probably would be that teachers would resent an activity about which they once only felt ambivalence.

Indeed, the danger in altering traditional relationships is to implement the form of a new relationship without the substance. "Hollow empowerment" -- that is, increasing the amount of time teachers spend on decisionmaking activities without a corresponding increase in teachers' influence over decisions -- will likely produce a backlash that will even disrupt the predictablity of social interactions that existed prior to the restructuring attempt.

The above two examples refer only to the predictability of behavior and responses between teachers and administrators. Restructuring, of course, may implicate many more relationships than that. The relationships between and among administrators at all levels, teachers, students, parents, community members, and external agencies are all the fair subject of restructuring depending upon the results that a district wants to produce.

Results

Results are partially the products of the particular patterns of rules, roles, and relationships that occur in a district. The desire to produce different results should be the only stimulant for altering these patterns. However, the term "results" is used here to mean more than student scores on a test, the number of national merit scholars, or the percentage of dropouts. At a minimum, results must be markedly different from those currently produced and must focus on staff members as well as students.

Different results that instigate a restructuring initiative must be non-trivial (i.e., significantly different from those the district already produces). To get 85 percent rather than 80 percent of a student population scoring above some desired level on an achievement test is to seek a trivial difference in results. More substantial would be to seek an alteration in the type of learning students evidence or, better yet, the type of student who demonstrates a significant gain in achievement.

Certain results may be phrased in terms of student performance; but indicators of the outcomes of student performance -- as opposed to indicators of the nature of the performance itself -- provide little guidance as to what it is about teacher and administrator behavior that has to be changed in order to improve student performance. If a school district's staff members discover that 35 percent of its students have failed a state minimum competency test in math, for example, where do they turn for remedies? Test results (including detailed analyses of test objectives) do not tell them whether students need more math instruction, different math instruction, better math teachers, increased opportunities to develop higher-order thinking skills, or an improved classroom learning environment, to name just a few of the possible implications of poor math scores. Student outcome measures, by themselves, are simply not useful for driving restructuring.

In Schlechty's view, student outcomes are the products of quality, but do not measure quality themselves. [7] Quality measures attend to the actual work that students, teachers, and administrators perform. Thus, while a restructuring district will clearly have differences in student outcomes in mind when it undertakes its effort, it also will focus on a variety of intermediate steps related to student and staff performance, the attainment of which are assumed to lead to improved student learning. Such results may be the extent to which students complete classroom and homework assignments, the amount of time students actually

engage in school work, the development of a common language of instruction among all staff members, or knowledge about and agreement with a shared purpose concerning the district's work and/or the quality of the work that staff members design for students to do. The point is that if new patterns of rules, roles, and relationships are needed to produce different results, then those results should provide considerable direct information on what it is about those new patterns that is effective or ineffective.

The success of the restructuring movement is likely to be determined by how well the issue of assessing results is handled by educators. Traditional measures and existing assessment programs (such as many of the statewide tests currently in place) were created under traditional assumptions about the purpose of schooling and how schooling occurs. To the extent that these devices guide a system toward improvement, they are likely to guide the system to do better at what it is already doing. An equally legitimate purpose of restructuring is to enable schools do a job they have never done before. Contradictions between current assessment strategies and this purpose are major obstacles to restructuring.

When "Restructuring" Is Real

Restructuring is a conjunctive concept. That is, restructuring necessarily embodies alterations in all four of the above aspects. Indeed, the primary importance of the concept of restructuring resides in its recognition of the fact that any significant changes in curriculum and instruction, staff roles, decisionmaking, and accountability -- to use Cohen's educationally specific definition of restructuring [8] -- entail addressing the total social fabric of the district. Restructuring acknowledges the inherent loose coupling of educational organizations and the necessity for counterbalancing this natural lack of systemic unity of effort and purpose. For this reason, restructuring is a districtwide event; although individual buildings must alter their rules, roles, relationships, and results, this is unlikely to happen effectively without school district involvement.

Restructuring is a potent subcategory of the universe of school improvement initiatives and is perhaps the only subcategory that represents more than "tinkering." While restructuring efforts have a specific content focus similar to that of many school improvement projects -- e.g., higher-order thinking skills, at-risk students, etc., the concern is not just with how a particular program should operate, but also with how the school district itself operates. This systemic view occasions the removal of contradictions between structure and process that impair a district's effectiveness. It does so by forcing explicit attention to the congruence between existing rules, roles, and relationships and those implicit in the substantive educational changes being sought. That is, the structure of schooling reinforces the process of schooling which in turn improves the effectiveness of schooling.

Thus, "restructuring" is a label appropriately applied to an initiative only when the effort clearly and explicitly addresses rules, roles, relationships, and results. Earlier examples contained in this paper concerned each of these aspects of the definition of restructuring individually. The following examples highlight the conjunctive nature of the concept. Assumed in each instance is that an overall vision for the district has already been formulated -- a task that is much more difficult to accomplish than this somewhat cavalier assumption suggests but that also has been discussed well in the literature on restructuring in business and education.

- Improving a district through a staff development program that requires every teacher to cycle regularly through workshops on critical instructional issues (such as learning styles, peer coaching, or teaching for thinking) is an attempt to affect the role of the teacher, primarily in terms of adding to the current definition of the role the expectation that professional development is not optional. This role-specific rule change would not constitute restructuring unless the district also engaged in activities, like specifying new staff- and student-related outcomes that were sought as a consequence of this staff development emphasis (results), establishing expectations for participation in the workshops that cut across role groups, incorporating the content of the workshops into supervisory procedures (systemwide rules), and broadening the decisionmaking process concerning staff development to include role groups that had not traditionally had much of a say in the program's direction (relationships).

- Increasing principals' and teachers' accountability for student achievement through the use of more extensive and intensive building-level student evaluation and reporting procedures is an alteration in systemwide rules that has implications for both specific roles in the district and student results. For such a change to be considered as restructuring, however, a district also must consider other changes, such as assessing the skills and knowledge of staff members in interpreting and using the information gained from the student evaluations (staff-related results) and redistributing decisionmaking authority so that appropriate corrective actions can be determined and taken by those closest to the students (relationships -- and additional changes in role-specific rules).

- A teacher career ladder plan and merit pay scale are sets of role-specific rules for attaching incentives to the performance of certain desirable professional behaviors. Although these devices focus attention on staff-related outcomes much more than the above two examples originally did, they will not constitute restructuring unless some additional changes are made. For example, the school district could increase the chances of its vision being realized by developing appropriate measures of student outcomes that are the logical products of the changes in teacher behavior (student-related results), by expanding the incentive program to include the performance of other role groups in the district (systemwide rules), and by making the evaluations upon which incentives are granted the responsibility of certain designated positions within each role group (relationships).

- Site-based management has become a particularly popular form of "restructuring." At its heart is an alteration in relationships, which stems from the idea that decisionmaking authority should be located closest to

the arena of action about which decisions are being made. Thus, parents would have more input into decisions affecting their children, teachers would be most influential about matters related to curriculum and instruction, principals would have more control over building-level budgeting, and the superintendent would be primarily responsible for being the system visionary and serving as the district's contact with the school board and other external authorities. Often missing from this formulation is a consideration of the staff and student outcomes (results) desired that are substantially different from those currently being proposed -- a step that is tantamount to jumping on an innovative bandwagon with no means of determining when the ultimate destination has been reached. Also, relationships would be little changed if increases in authority (the right to make decisions) were not accompanied by increases in influence (the actual ability to influence others to adhere to the decisions made). Such "hollow empowerment" can easily occur in districts where the right to decide is confused with the right to advise.

- Concerned with the number of students leaving school prior to graduation, a district defined part of the problem as the lack of a student sense of belonging in the school buildings. One way to combat this was to create "mini-schools" within each building, wherein groups of students and teachers remained together throughout high school in hopes that greater familiarity would lead to greater awareness of and ability to handle students' problems. Addressing student results, the rules for scheduling and grouping people, and the relationships between teachers, administrators, and students in this way, while dramatic, is not restructuring and is not likely to yield dramatic results unless some other steps are taken. For example, teachers in high schools are use to limited and distant relationships with students. Having 180 students for 50 minutes a day precludes any other kind of contact. Whether increased familiarity will breed concern or contempt will depend on the success of redefining both the role of student and the role of teacher. Moreover, such a program will, in all probability, necessitate a relocation of decisionmaking so that action can follow the identification of problems and solutions quickly. Thus, the relationship between "mini-schools" and the principal's office and the relationship between the building and the central office will have to receive considerable attention.

Final Comment

In each of the above cases, the point should be clear: Different results require different patterns of rules, roles, and relationships. Anything less is not restructuring. To the extent that restructuring continues to mean many things to many people, it will soon become an empty label, impotent to galvanize action. To the extent that restructuring focuses serious attention on systemic issues like those discussed above, then its usefulness should outlast the normal life span of educational fads.

While rules, roles, relationships, and results suggest that restructuring cannot be achieved by concentrating on isolated parts of a school system, at the same time they run the risk of oversimplifying the process of restructuring. These concepts lend themselves to a "checklist" mentality that overlooks the more subtle and messy aspects of human interaction. Remember that shared understandings reside at the core of all four "R's" and that these understandings derive from individuals' and groups' values and beliefs. To talk of restructuring, then, is to talk of cultural, rather than simply organizational, change. Culture is inherently conservative in that it embodies existing conceptions of what is and what ought to be. As many thoughtful educational observers have noted, altering these conceptions is a task that cannot be taken lightly. [9] However, to understand the meaning of restructuring is to understand both the difficulty in doing it and the promise it holds for producing substantial, results-oriented change that lasts.

Footnotes

1. Everett K. Wilson, **Sociology: Rules, Roles, and Relationships** (Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1971).

2. Wilson, pp. 86-87.

3. Terrence E. Deal, "The Symbolism of Effective Schools," **Elementary School Journal**, Vol. 85, 1985, pp. 601-620.

4. Wilson, p. 90.

5. Wilson, pp. 186-187.

6. Wilson, p. 88.

7. Phillip C. Schlechty, **Purpose, Vision, and Structure: Leadership Imperatives for School Reform** (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, forthcoming).

8. See Michael Cohen's "Foreword" in Jane L. David, **Restructuring in Progress: Lessons from Pioneering Districts** (Washington, DC: National Governors' Association, 1989).

9. See Seymour B. Sarason, **The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change** (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971); and Phillip C. Schlechty, **Teaching and Social Behavior** (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976).

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